New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
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Listed alphabetically are the names of actors and actresses in shows opening during the year 1957. The number opposite the name indicates the pages on which each is found in NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS. We regret that we cannot include the various cast changes, but can only give the opening night casts as published in the New York newspapers.

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"Miss Isobel"

Daily Mirror

December 27, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Miss Isobel' Dull, Depressing

We'd about come to the conclusion that any play starring Shirley Booth was a shoo-in until we caught "Miss Isobel" at the Royale Theatre Thursday evening. We doubt that even our Shirley can make the turnstiles click for this one. It's too dour, depressing and unpleasant for the Booth fans.

In this instance, playwrights Michael Plant and Denis Webb, an Australian and an Englishman, have Shirley impersonating a gray-haired, 70-year-old matron, who has been forced to turn her down-at-the-heels San Francisco mansion into a rabbit warren of small apartments. But she doesn't mind, for she finds her tenants fun.

SHE PARTICULARLY likes a breezy Chinese boarder and the young son of a young widow. But when it comes to her own daughter, ouch. She's a selfish, shrewish spinster, bent on marrying a ne'er-do-well because time is running out on her. When this callous femme ransacks mama's room in search of money for her dowry, it unsettles the mind of the old lady.

She goes into second childhood, imagining her daughter as her mother, dreaming that she's an Australian belle again, and permits herself to be taken to a mental sanitarium.

This turn of affairs changes the daughter into something resembling a human being. The young widow finds contentment in marriage to a blind Korean war veteran. And "Miss Isobel" gives her stashed-away cash to the little boy.

That Miss Booth is unable to do much for the title role is, perhaps, the best criticism we can make of the new arrival. It was embarrassing for at least one of her admirers, to see her struggling with such unrewarding material. In fact, we wondered at the final curtain's fall if she weren't shamming amnesia—there's a hint of it there—in order to forget the whole darn thing.

UNDER CEDRIC HARDWICKE'S literal direction, Nancy Marchand, Robert Duke, Edith King, Peter Lazer, Kathleen Maguire and John Randolph labor valiantly in a lost cause. They must have been dreaming of happier days in more felicitous assignments. As for Sir Cedric, he was probably recalling, for instance, triumphs in such delights as "Pygmalion," "Caesar and Cleopatra," "Candida" and "Antigone."

Though we think Leonard Sillman and John Roberts came a cropper in buying "Miss Isobel," we must salute them for giving it the best of everything. Such as Peter Larkin's wonderfully atmospheric setting. This boy is a whiz at designing striking decor.

If we join Miss Booth this morning in a loss of memory, check it off to our desire to forget that she ever got trapped in this fumbling dullie. Yep, we want to banish from our mind last night's distressing encounter with "Miss Isobel."

"MISS ISOBEL"

Play in three acts and five scenes by Michael Plant and Denis Webb; staged by Cedric Hardwicke; setting by Peter Larkin; costumes by Audre; lighting by Lee Watson; presented by Leonard Sillman and John Roberts at the Royale Theatre, December 26, 1957. The cast:

Mrs. Ackroyd.....Shirley Booth
Mrs. Ling.....Edith King
Miriam Ackroyd.....Nancy Marchand
Robin.....Peter Lazer
Ellen.....Kathleen Maguire
Howard.....John Randolph
Nurse.....Dinnie Smith
Andrew McNeil....Robert Duke

DAILY NEWS

December 27, 1957

Shirley Booth Grows Younger in 'Miss Isobel' but One Critic Ages

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Miss Isobel," by Michael Plant and Denis Webb, is intended to be a sweet and touching dramatic vehicle for one of the most resourceful actresses we have, Shirley Booth. But during its first performance at the Royale Theatre last evening I felt more uncomfortable than emotionally moved.

"Miss Isobel" is the story of a nice little old lady, a one-time nabob of Nob Hill, San Francisco, who suffers an odd series of sudden illnesses. Each time she recovers quickly, and each time she thinks she is younger. In the last act, with her long gray hair brushed like Alice's down her back, she is six years old or thereabouts—a demure and cheerful lass who is perfectly willing to go to the private sanitarium which has been arranged for her.

This play tries but fails, I think, to show that there is beauty and excitement at any age. Miss Booth is happy in the beginning as a relict in reduced circumstances, whose big house now lodges a renter on an upper floor—a quite unbelievable Chinese lady from the Grauman dynasty.

Time Flies Backward

She is happy, in her gentle way, as the years skip backward. She enjoys thinking that her daughter—as thwarted a spinster as ever trod a stage—is her mother. She is aglow with virginal expectancy as she dresses up for a teen-age dance. When the years fly farther backward she, who used to enjoy reading the poets aloud to young people, cannot understand a book if it has no pictures to look at.

As Miss Booth grew younger last evening, I grew older. She and the playwrights could not carry me back with them, so I was two hours older when I came out than when I went in. If "Miss Isobel" had accomplished what it wanted to do, I, too, would have been a clean-minded, clear-hearted, confident six-year-old as I left the Royale Theatre.

There are a couple of subsidiary plots. There is the daughter doomed to spinsterhood. There is a little boy, the only one who goes along with Miss Booth and believes whatever age she is. There is the boy's mother, who falls in love with a blinded veteran of the Korean War, and there is that dratted Chinese tenant.

The company includes Nancy Marchand as the daughter, Peter Lazer as the boy, Kathleen Maguire as the boy's mother, Robert Duke as the blind young man and Edith King as the Oriental. Peter Larkin has done a fancy set and Cedric Hardwicke has directed.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 27, 1957

Shirley Booth Seen at Royale

By FRANK ASTON.

The Royale has Shirley Booth. She is starred in a misfortune called "Miss Isobel." Miss Booth can do no wrong. Her current vehicle can do almost nothing right.

Miss Booth has admirable support, particularly in the person of Peter Lazer who is 11 and just plain marvelous in a role almost as long as the star's. And the Peter Larkin full-stage set is one of the season's better displays of carpentry as it represents a spooky, rambling mansion with conservatory, tower, garden, pagoda, stairs, kitchen and a period bedroom.

The thin, diffuse plot attempts to show how a nice old lady goes into a mental state which causes her to imagine she again is a bride (for Act II) and then a girl too young to read (for Act III).

Act I is virtually zero in its prattling attempts to clear the way for the forthcoming vagaries. It presents Miss Booth as the old widow inhabiting the San Francisco house to which she had been brought as a 16-year-old bride from Australia. She has never quite freed her daughter from maternal control, with the result that the daughter, no longer a chick, is completely sour on life, love, hope, mamma and herself. Nancy Marchand gets into this role with considerable savagery.

The mother has as roomers one dame with Chinese overtones, one youthful widow, and the latter's young son who adores the landlady. Next door is a Scot who has been blinded in Korea and likes Shelley. From somewhere comes an unhappy fellow who is daughter's last chance at matrimony.

The daughter brawls with her beau, the pretty widow and the veteran fall in love, the elderly widow reveals she has hidden in a big book some bills that run as high as $1000. Then all of a sudden she goes nuts. So did this reviewer.

Miss Booth makes the most of a couple of high moments. She has a lovely entrance in a party dress which she has innocently swiped from the Chinese creature. She is almost genuinely pathetic when she is in her little-girl period, with her hair in a ribbon and a suggestion of lisp to her singsong speech.

New York Post

December 27, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Shirley Booth Survives Disaster

The magnificent Shirley Booth survived her most frightening test at the Royale Theater last night, although her vehicle, a play by Michael Plant and Denis Webb called "Miss Isobel," didn't share in her remarkable personal victory. For the melancholy truth is that the measure of her triumph was exactly the measure of its dismal failure. Her success lay in the fact that, playing an embarrassing role in an embarrassing drama, she kept the audience from getting out of hand.

Who else, I wonder, could have maintained order and even a certain amount of interest among the first-nighters in the part of an old lady who, shocked by her daughter's anger, plunges headlong into her own past, turning first into a young bride, who calls her unfilial offspring "mother," and then, shocked once more, becoming a child playing with dolls? And Miss Booth doesn't merely keep her characterization from being silly. She even makes it real and touching.

This, however, is a miracle which unfortunately can't be extended to the play. In addition to its other serious failings, "Miss Isobel" is notably tedious dramatically as it goes about reporting the emotional effect of the old lady's mental illness on her embittered daughter, a lonely young widow, a sympathetic boy, a courageous blind man living next door, and an eccentric matron whose husband is in Hong Kong. It seems she has a beneficial effect on all of them.

It is certainly an amazing achievement for Miss Booth to give such appealing warmth, humor and pathos to scenes so inept that, in almost any other hands, they might have sent playgoers screaming into the night. But everyone has known for some years that she is one of the finest actresses in the world, and it didn't require so gruelling a gamut of clumsy playwriting to demonstrate her brilliance. It merely seems a brutal waste of a beautiful skill.

I'm sure the two dramatists had the handsomest of intentions. They were attempting to write not only a showy and moving role for their star, but also a touching and sensitive study of mental fantasy. It doesn't turn out that way, though, and, whatever critical bruises they are feeling today, I hope they realize that they are extremely fortunate gentlemen to have had Miss Booth on hand to prevent an even more unhappy evening for their luckless brain child.

The supporting performances are also excellent. I admired particularly the work of Nancy Marchand as the angry daughter, Kathleen Maguire as the young widow, young Peter Lazer as her son, and John Randolph as the fleeing suitor. Peter Larkin contributed an interesting set, and Cedric Hardwicke directed ably. But I doubt if Sir Cedric could have saved "Miss Isobel" if he had ridden in on that elephant he had an equal amount of trouble with at Mike Todd's recent party.

The New York Times

December 27, 1957

Theatre: 'Miss Isobel'

Shirley Booth Stars in Play at Royale

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SHIRLEY BOOTH, whom everyone loves, is appearing in another play that it is difficult to like—"Miss Isobel," which opened at the Royale last evening.

It is the work, if such a noun is permissible, of Michael Plant and Denis Webb. It gives Miss Booth an opportunity to play a charming woman with softening of the brain. In the beginning she is a lovable widow with a nagging daughter. Suddenly something happens. She reverts to childhood in her mind.

Since Miss Booth is indisputably an actress, and since an actress is fascinated with bizarre assignments, Miss Booth probably enjoys wriggling out of her natural maturity and putting on the skin of childhood—drinking water like a child, simpering like a child, wriggling into her seat like a child, gazing with innocent eyes at the people who hover around her. Having longed for the impossible, Miss Booth has now taken a whack at it.

Although she is normally one of the actresses most easy to believe, she cannot make this part anything but maudlin and embarrassing. And what do the authors think they are getting it? Doubtless there is some great moral lesson concealed in "Miss Isobel." But it looks to this observer like a Charlotte Brönte theme written by Gene Stratton Porter with finger paints.

All the actors deserve citations for fortitude beyond the line of duty in the toughest of professions. But Nancy Marchand especially: cast as an ungrateful daughter and vinegary spinster, she has to play a blend of Antigone and Medea, and, by golly, she does, and very well.

Edith King has to play a silly old crone, and does; and Kathleen Maguire has to play a patient, loving, sacrificial mother who is also as good as gold, and she does, too. Little Peter Lazer plays a little boy, naturally named Robin, whose kindness and purity are beyond belief. Master Lazer does it better than anyone has a right to expect. Is there a blind man with a cane and a sweet nature in "Miss Isobel"? There is, and he is played by Robert Duke. John Randolph plays a bum with candor. As the nurse, Dinnie Smith has the best part in the play: she doesn't have to speak a line.

•

Seven years ago Miss Booth brought a lot of truth into the theatre in "Come Back, Little Sheba." Four years ago she performed the same office in "The Time of the Cuckoo." Since then she has been temporizing with the theatre, squandering her talents at random. Put "Miss Isobel" at the bottom of the list. Conceivably it amuses Miss Booth. But it's tough on the noggin.

Journal American

December 27, 1957

Shirley Booth A Winner in Ungifted Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE comes that horrible occasion when even the most gifted performer is defeated by an un-gifted script, and this happened to Shirley Booth at the Royale Theatre last night. The play, "Miss Isobel," by Michael Plant and Denis Webb, is just too mild and meandering to survive, despite Miss Booth's heroic efforts.

The challenge to undertake the part can be understood; the star comes aboard aged 70-odd and, because of a brain injury, retrogresses by stages to childhood.

This is the sort of role that performers dream of during layoffs, and Miss Booth can hardly be convicted for considering it a possible tour de force, an escape from the comedies and musical froth with which she's been lately involved.

The trouble is, however, that it is a vast vacuum. She retrogresses, all right, probably with more charm and warmth and perception than anybody, but it doesn't seem to matter much.

Sure, there is a bitter and frustrated daughter who is finally freed, and there is a small boy who loves her and understands her with the implausible wisdom of youth. But nothing is brought to a dramatic climax.

Basic Fault

I believe the basic fault lies in the fact that no major emotion is getting through to Miss Booth, our heroine. Obviously deranged, she is serene thinking she is once more a young matron, a youngster, or a child. So she is finally banished to a home for the aged—her actual life had ended long since and she is blissful with her pet caterpillar.

Even with these meager trappings, Miss Booth of course succeeds in nearly hypnotizing the customers. She hasn't many moments for comedy, but she has several scenes with Peter Lazer, the kid who "understands" her, and here she earns her medals.

Like all child actors, Master Lazer is an absolute phenomenon, but Miss Booth takes him on alone and yet manages to emerge a winner. This is high praise.

In her Broadway debut, Nancy Marchand is most compelling as the daughter of this reduced aristocrat who has converted her San Francisco mansion into a boarding house.

There are other notable contributions by Robert Duke, as the blind veteran next door; Edith King, a whimsical tenant; Kathleen Maguire, the mother of the sympathetic sprout; John Randolph and Dinnie Smith in lesser assignments.

Peter Larkin's set of the complicated dwelling—a bedroom, kitchen, garden, and overhanging cat-walks and ballustrades—is most artful, but also baffling. Between acts I heard a lady say, that if somebody jumped off one of those high places she would simply scream.

Sir Cedric Hardwicke directed, extremely well, I thought.

But I'm afraid the sad fact remains that we just don't care too much about "Miss Isobel", Miss Booth to the contrary.